

CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS.

CONSERVATISM.

(Continued.)

Many foreigners in China, who are perfectly willing to conform to Chinese ideas in regard to Chinese affairs, do not care to have Chinese ideas thrust upon them in regard to affairs which are not Chinese. It is often very difficult to prevent Chinese friends from inundating a foreign establishment on the 1st day of January, with a view to "salute the year," although the house may be full of foreign guests, and although the master thereof most decidedly does not wish to have his foreign year "saluted" on the Chinese plan, and has been at great pains to make this clear in advance. But his Chinese friends do not care what he wants. They know what he ought to want, and what he shall have, which is an appropriate salutation for his New Year. Even while these remarks are committed to paper, the Chinese servants of the family, who have (unfortunately) just made the discovery that it is the foreign New Year, have furnished a timely illustration of this national characteristic, by appearing in a body to "salute the year" at 4.05 in the afternoon! Not essentially different was the liberal-conservatism of a native pundit in the winter's employ, who apologized in advance for calling upon his patrons three days after the Chinese New Year, on the ground that the elegant (borrowed) garment in which he was to appear, would be in use during the first three days by the proper owner!

The fixed resolution to do certain acts in certain ways, and in no other, is not peculiar to China. The coolies in India habitually carried burdens upon their heads, and applied the same principle to the removal of earth for railways. When the contractors substituted wheelbarrows, the coolies merely transferred the burdens to the tops of their skulls. The coolies in Brazil carry burdens in the same way as those of India. A foreign gentleman in the former country gave a servant a letter to be posted, and was surprised to see him put the letter on his head and weight it with a stone to keep it in place. The exact similarity of mental processes reveals a similarity of cause, and it is a cause very potent in Chinese affairs. It leads to those multiplied instances of imitiveness, with which we are all so familiar, as when the cook breaks an egg and throws it away, each time that he makes a pudding, because on the first occasion when he was shown how to make a pudding an egg happened to be bad; or when the tailor puts a patch on a new garment, because an old one given him as a measure, chanced to be thus decorated. Stories of this sort, and doubtings often meant as harmless exaggerations of a Chinese characteristic, but they represent the reality with great fidelity.

Every one acquainted with Chinese habits will be able to adduce instances of a devotion to precedent, which seems to us unaccountable, and which really is so, until we apprehend the postulate which underlies the act. In a country which stretches through some twenty-five degrees of latitude, but in which winter furs are taken off, and straw hats are put on, according to a fixed rule for the whole empire, it would be strange if precedent were not a kind of divinity. In regions where the only heat in the houses during the cold winter comes from the stoves, fire under the "stove-bed," or *kang*, is not uncommon for travellers who have been caught in a sudden "cold snap," to find that no arrangements can induce the landlord of the inn to heat the *kang* because the season for heating the *kang* has not arrived! The reluctance of Chinese artificers to adopt new methods is sufficiently well known to all, but perhaps few even of these conservatives are more conservative than the head of a company of workmen employed to burn bricks in a kiln which, with all that apparatus thereto, was the property of foreigners, and not of those who worked it. As there was occasion to use a kind of square brick larger than those which happened to be in the fashion in that region, the foreigner ordered larger ones to be made. All that was necessary for this purpose, was simply the preparation of a wooden tray, the size of the required brick, to be used as a mould. When the bricks were wanted they were not forthcoming, and the foreman, to whom the orders had been given, being called to account for his neglect, refused to be a party to any such innovation, adding as his all sufficient reason, the affirmation that *under the whole heaven, there is no such mould as this!*

The bearing of the subject of conservatism upon the relations of foreigners to China and the Chinese is not likely to be lost sight of for a moment, by any one whose lot is cast in China, and who has the smallest interest in the future welfare of this mighty empire. The last quarter of the nineteenth century seems destined to be a critical period in Chinese history. A great deal of very new wine is offered to the Chinese, who have no other provision for its reception, than a varied assortment of very old wine-skins. Thanks to the instinctive conservatism of the Chinese nature, very little of the new wine has thus far been accepted, and for that little, new bottles are in course of preparation. The present attitude of China towards the lands of the West is an attitude of procrastination. There is on the one hand, small desire for that which is new, and upon the other, no desire at all, nor even willingness to give up the old. As we see ancient mud huts that ought long ago to have reverted to their native earth, shored up with clumsy mud pillars which but postpone the inevitable fall, so we behold old customs, old superstitions, and old faiths now outworn, propped up and made to do the same duty as heretofore. "If the old does not go, the new does not come," we are told; and not without truth. The process of change from the one to the other may long be resisted, and may then come about suddenly. At a time when it was first proposed to introduce telegraphs, the Governor General of a maritime province reported to the Emperor that the hostility of the people to the innovation was so great, that the wires could not be put up. But when war with France was imminent, and the construction of the line was put upon an entirely different basis, the provincial authorities promptly set up the telegraph wires, and saw that they were respected. Ten years ago, the superstition of *fungshui* was believed by many to be an almost insuperable obstacle to the introduction of railways in China. The very first short line constructed as an outlet for the tin-pot mines, passed through a large Chinese cemetery, the graves being removed to make way for the line, and would have been in England or in France. A single inspection of that blasted graveyard was sufficient to produce the conviction that *fungshui* could never stand before an engine, when the issue is narrowed down to trial of strength between "wind-water" and steam. The experience gained in the recent extension of this initial line shows clearly that however financial considerations may delay the introduction of railways, geomantic superstitions are for this purpose quite inert.

The union of the conservative instinct with the capacity for invasion of precedent, is visible in important Chinese affairs. In China the principle is better settled, than that when one of his parents dies, an official must retire from office. Yet against his repeated and fearful remonstrances, the most powerful subject in the empire is commanded by the throne to continue his attention to the intricate details of the most important pleas of duties to be found to the empire, through all the year of what should have been mourning retirement after the death of his mother. No principle would seem to be more firmly established in China, than that a father is the superior of his son, who must always do him reverence. Equally well established is the principle that the emperor is superior to all his subjects, who must always do him reverence. When therefore, as at present, it happens that from a collateral line is adopted a young emperor, whose father is still living, it would appear to be inevitable that the father must either commit suicide, or go into a permanent retirement. Such it was supposed when Kuang Hsi ascended the throne, would actually be the end of Prince Chun. Yet during the illness of the latter, his son the emperor made repeated calls upon his subordinate superior, the father; and some *modus vivendi* has been arrived at, since this same father holds important offices under his son.

As already remarked, the conservative instinct leads the Chinese to attach undue importance to precedent. But rightly understood, and cautiously used, this is a great safeguard for foreigners in their dealings with so sensitive, so obstinate, and so conservative a people. It is only necessary to imitate the Chinese method, to take things for granted, to assume the existence of rights which have not been expressly withheld, to defend them warily when they are assailed and by all means to hold on. Thus, as in the case of the right of foreign residence in the interior, and in many others, wise conservatism is the safest defence. The threatening reef which seemed so insuperable a barrier to navigation, once penetrated, offers upon the inner side a lagoon of peace and tranquillity, safe from the storms and breakers which vainly beat against it.

The Chinese never for an instant free themselves from the idea expressed by Napoleon, when, pointing to the pyramids, he cried to his soldiers, "Forty centuries are looking down upon you!" But when we consider in the abstract, and especially when we encounter the concrete, the embarras arising from Chinese determination to be consistent with the vast background of their history, most of us will sympathize with the view of a little girl who had been disputing with her brother as to which of them was born earlier in the day. The mother decided that the brother was born at two in the morning, and his sister at seven. "I don't care," was the reply, "what is the use of being born before it is time to get up?"—N. C. Daily News.

FORMOSA.

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

Tamsui, 10th February, 1889.
The joint proclamation issued some time ago by H.E. Liu Ming Chuan and Liu, Assistant Commissioner, exhorting the people to plant the mulberry, with the view of creating a silk industry in Formosa, is already bearing some good fruit, as large tracts of land in the neighbourhood of Taipei and Banca are already planted with mulberry trees and the leaves are large and hardy, and to all appearance the soil of Formosa is very good for this purpose.

The energetic comrade of Messrs. Boyd & Co., Mr. Li Ching Sing, who was one of the first who started experimentally the rearing of silkworms with great success, sent some of the silk to Canton and Shanghai, and it was when compared with silk at these places found to be equal in quality, and when manufactured should produce silk of the same value as Canton and Shanghai silk. Mr. Suiter, from Shanghai, has been here several weeks in connection with the commencing of the silk industry, and it is to be hoped that some of the wealthy Chinese will combine together, and now that experimental rearing of silkworms has proved a success, will commence on a large scale.

By the *Peking*, Mon. 2nd and his family have left again, and as far as can be understood, they were not successful in making any contract with the Governor.

Rain, rain every day; wet, cold and miserable weather.

No later news regarding the wreck of the *Anglo-India*.

The north-east monsoon has been very boisterous of late in the Formosa Strait, and the telegraph steamer *Fecheu* has not succeeded yet in repairing the Pescadore cable.

There are other storms in North Formosa—say at Taipei—brewing very strongly.

"As you doubtless are aware, the Governor of Formosa sent his Secretary, Hung Shih, to England, to bring out the steamers *Cass* and *Swift* from home. Poor Hung is now in durance vile in Taipei for squandering money belonging to the government in personal jollification. The cousins and aunts, said to have found employment in Formosa by the party whose name I have mentioned, are said to be ordered away from the island by H.E. the Governor—one of the best Governors we ever have had in this country.—*Mercury*.

NEWCHWANG.

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

It is hardly any use giving news of this place, for what we can say is simply a repetition of the old story. Starvation everywhere for the poor people. It becomes monotonous, but for actual witnesses the scenes are simply harrowing. Villages of from fifty to three hundred families, all dying for want of the commonest necessities of life. Every winter there is more or less distress in this, perhaps the poorest province of China, but this has been the worst in the experience of the oldest residents. If any unusual or unexpected misfortune overtakes natives, they are completely done, for they have not the least notion of providing for rainy days, and twenty-five years' property is either starved or wasted on the general sale of property, or on comfortable foreign employment, where, as compared to the pay received in the highest mandarin families, they are in clover. The advantage, as a rule, are continually lost. Even when they don't gamble, and the best Chinese are given to the passion, so much so that it is considered right to allow it some outlet for ten days at new year time, there are events always taking place. Parents, with children, etc., die and have to be buried, or the youth takes a wife. This eventually might have been put before alighting to the death. Anyhow, whenever any event takes place, there is a sale, or a funeral, or all the savings, if there be any, are squandered away in presents or festivities. The chances are there are not any savings, so several months of future earnings are spent, and the calf is eaten before its birth. Everything is pawned, and money is borrowed at 5 per cent. interest. "Makkee" is the order of the day. A woman, as we read in the official *Gazette*, even sells herself to bury her mother. 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